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Discourse on ECD Practitioners' Perceptions of Leadership Practices in a Multicultural Environment: The South African Context

Abstract

This empirical paper reports on perceptions held by early childhood practitioners about leadership in a multicultural environment. The paper problematises leadership in early childhood development (ECD) centres dealing with diverse ethnic children from the Black South African communities. Among others, it discusses the attributes required for leading a multicultural ECD environment, to contribute to ECD centre effectiveness. Managing a multicultural community is complex, however experienced leaders appreciate the validity of differences and commit to managing a multicultural environment. This empirical paper employed qualitative semi-structured approach to interview managers and practitioners on perceptions held about ECD leadership in multicultural centres. The increasing demands and expectations on ECD centre leaders having learners from diverse cultures, languages and backgrounds, reveal preparation and support challenges. Achievement of positive perceptions may require training, support and resources, because their absence may in fact lead to heightened tensions and prejudices about leaders by practitioners. Recommendations are that ECD centre managers be supported by government to develop cultural pluralism, inter group harmony, and the ability to think, work, and live within a multicultural context.

Keywords: early childhood education, early childhood development (ECD), ECD centre, township, leadership, practitioner perceptions, multiculturalism, diversity, multicultural environment

Introduction

The paper reflects on early childhood development (ECD) practitioners' perceptions of leadership in multicultural environment, looking at the leadership attributes of ECD centre managers in a multicultural Black township environment. ECD applies to the processes of child development from birth to nine years of age, and includes the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, moral and social development of the child (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012). Managing a multicultural ECD centre requires managers who motivate practitioners to achieve the core mission of the centre through quality teaching and learning. Such managers should have skills to develop practitioners to teach learners from different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. This goal is not easy to achieve in Black ECD contexts where untrained ECD practitioners have to teach large numbers of children from the local South African areas, as well as from international migrant families (Kotzé, 2015).

The context of early childhood centres

The ECD structure of South Africa is two-fold: one regulated and sponsored by the provincial government, and an independent one run by private bodies or communities (RSA, 2015). This paper focuses on ECD centres led by centre owners, who are government sponsored, old and not keen to advance themselves further, professionally and academically. These managers are mothers and grannies who decided to establish the early childhood education centres to help mothers who are employed but cannot afford the formal ECD centres, that are expensive and far from their homes. The ECD centres became a business opportunity in the Black communities to benefit both the employed mothers and the grannies who were previously unemployed (Modise, 2019). Their ECD centres are informal but they were encouraged to register under the Department of Social Development (DSD) to get sponsorship. These centres offer Pre-Grade R programmes designed for children between 0-4 years of age, and 5-6 years (Leshoele, 2016). The challenge, however, is that most Pre-Grade R centres operate without proper documentation and have untrained and unqualified practitioners. According to Modise (2019), the optimal leadership of ECD centres require skilled leaders and practitioner support from relevant stakeholders, to make teaching and learning in ECD classes effective. In other words, collaboration with all the stakeholders is important.

Leadership in a multicultural environment

Supported ECD centre leaders can reconstruct the national teaching and learning education system and make fundamental inputs to existing educational policies and practices, to suit multiculturalism, multilingualism and multiethnicity (Le Roux, 2000). The different cultures in SA require multicultural leadership skills in common human values and specific values where specific groups behave differently and have different beliefs and cultures. These groups may have different/specific values from the various ethnic groups, as well as common/shared values by all the different ethnic groups in the society. In such an environment, the leader and practitioners have to recognise the common societal values that can be developed from specific values, to avoid clashes and to encourage tolerance and acceptance between the different groups. Different cultural/specific values will influence education as children are introduced to multiple value systems promoting diversity in classrooms (Nakaya, 2018).

Practitioners' perceptions of ECD leadership

ECD leaders' understanding of the notion of cultural and social contrasts in early childhood education, influences how children learn about general stereotypes at an early age. For multicultural and multilingual teaching to succeed, practitioners should lay the foundation of intercultural relations, tolerance, and language competencies to the child at an early age (Garifullina & Garifullina, 2019). Currently practitioners teaching in the multilingual and multicultural township or Black residential areas, are not competent in all the languages spoken in the township and cannot promote multilingualism since the learner's home world and that of the centre are not integrated. Trained managers and practitioners can discard

differences and facilitate similarities to arrive at sameness. The lack of support for ECD centres in the homes, churches and garage-based centres, cannot create a theoretical foundation that develops teacher personality for a successful multilingual and multicultural teaching. Additionally, lack of training funds from government to ECD centres creates a barrier to practitioners' teaching and learning programs on children in multicultural environments (Nakaya, 2018). Hence, leaders and practitioners cannot ensure young children benefit from the multicultural ECD centres in the Black communities.

Support for ECD practitioners

Supporting practitioner can ensure practitioners are familiarised with the traditions of children's culture through ethnic culture practices that foster mutual openness, interest and tolerance. Children from different cultures can develop ethnocultural values from similarities in other cultural values and from own individual cultures. Critical stereotypes related to minority cultures may be addressed to establish harmonious learner-practitioner relations. The objectives of multicultural education is to introduce all ethnic nationalities into one culture (Modise, 2019). The lack of preparation and training, however, challenges the practitioners' application of multicultural and multilingual teaching because the curriculum does not address disparities in cultural diversity. This perspective of learning ought to be reviewed to connect theory and practice to merge the children's worlds without compromising their cultures.

Centre practitioners and multilingual teaching

South African government's goal of making early childhood education accessible to all South African children, is an acknowledgement of the importance of ECD centres in South Africa. The constant influx of people from surrounding provinces, and, immigrants from various neighbouring South African countries, necessitates practitioner training in skills required in a culturally diverse context. The leader's attitude, knowledge base and cultural intelligence, is crucial for ensuring practitioner support in these culturally diverse classrooms. Once, supported, ECD staff may acquire a deeper level of sensitivity to the cultural and linguistic needs of learners. This means the centre staff should have proficiency in many languages (Republic of South Africa, 2015). The challenge, however, is that, not all practitioners and centre leaders can communicate effectively in two or more languages with more or less the same degree of proficiency, and learners in the classrooms, too, do not speak more than one language. Therefore, during teaching, learners from different ethnic groups should be grouped together to allow them the comfort of sameness, and to bridge the dominant culture in the school. The grouping of multilingual learners may prompt them to reflect on the advantage of activating their own linguistic and cultural differences in the classroom, through the use and manipulation of their linguistic and cultural skills during the lesson (Moua, 2011). The interaction of local and international learners may help in closing the gap of unfamiliarity and cultural knowledge in the classroom. This practice, however, may be challenging to anxious learners who may sometimes grow discouraged and may

not participate. Therefore, practitioners should support the learners by being sensitive to their difficulties.

Teaching multicultural classes

Teaching in a multilingual class requires the skill and knowledge of the use of multiple languages in a classroom. Multicultural education and incorporation of the culturally different learners is more effective in the mainstream culture and society (Banks, 2015), if the process serves as a resource, and not a liability. Therefore, practitioners should ask for help from parents, by setting up English learning tasks to be translated into the different languages spoken at home, in support of multilingualism in the class. Since language is not stable and is always subject to negotiation, practitioners should adapt it for classroom learning that engages issues of language difference(s). Teaching learners from internal migrations, and from neighbouring countries in mother tongue should ensure this is in line with the multi-ethnic context, to bring success to the teaching and learning of all learners. The material developed for centre teaching should be written in mother tongue to allow for ease of use by the practitioners. A learner's development may be negatively affected if cultural habits are not concurrently developed with other areas of their learning (Moua, 2011).

Research methodology

In exploring the discourse on practitioners' perceptions of leadership practices in a multicultural environment in the South African context, the following five key aspects focused on, to establish the ECD leadership practices in multicultural contexts and the views of practitioners: the vision of management and leadership in centres; practitioner preparation for multilingual classes; changes that can be made in ECD centre leadership; the expectations for management/leadership in centres; and, managers' expectation of support for practitioners and learners. From each centre 7 female participants (1 centre leader, 6 practitioners) were interviewed individually, and in a focus group for 30-45 minutes each of the ECD centres in the different townships. The total participants interviewed from the three centres were 21 female participants, since there were no males in the centres. The interviewed groups were mostly professionally untrained except for a few (four) trained practitioners in all three centres. The interviews were digitally recorded using audio recordings, transcribed and analysed.

Discussion

Theme 1: Training and support for practitioners

The response from centre leaders and practitioners regarding the centre vision, yielded similar sentiments of adequate training required for teaching multicultural children in the centres. The leaders were aware that the children's foundational cognitive abilities, attitudes and skills needed to be developed in preparation for primary schooling and the rest of life. They acknowledged that they were old and untrained and could not study further. They wanted practitioners to be provided with

knowledge and resources for teaching multicultural ECD centres, and to cater for the well-being of practitioners and learners. This is what they said:

Although practitioners do not all have the required ECD qualifications, most of them can learn on the job because they love children, a quality more important than a certificate.

They also wished the government could fund practitioners for further training since the parents in the community were either unemployed or earned very little money to can contribute to the centre. They said:

Parents around the centre are poor and earn very little money. They cannot make any contribution because they are struggling to make ends meet. The government must fund practitioners to study further.

Theme 2: Love for children

Centre leaders emphasised practitioners' love for children has prepared and motivated them to work with children, however, skills development in teaching multilingual classes requires the acquisition of skills for teaching multilingual and multicultural classes from a formal training, together with the love for children. This view was supported by practitioners who stated that they enjoy working with children and viewed their role as practitioners as very rewarding to their career. They said:

We do not have qualifications but if trained, we will become good leaders. We love children and we have good role models in our leaders, even though they are untrained and old. We know they want us to continue with this type of business in future.

The leaders and practitioners blamed the previous apartheid government and said that it knew the situation of parents in the community but did not help fund the centres and practitioners to improve multilingual teachers in the centres.

Theme 3: Funding and resources for the centre

Regarding what can be changed in leadership, centre managers felt that trained practitioners could become better leaders if trained in colleges or universities to get the ECD qualification. They knew that their age did not allow them to study further since they are old and commented as follows:

Practitioners need more training to become better leaders than us. We are old and cannot start going to school. As centre managers we care about the children and together with the practitioners, we do not want to see children left uncared for.

What both leaders and practitioners wanted done differently in leadership was the provision of more support in the form of funding and resources for the centres and the practitioners. The leaders said:

The government should give us funds to empower the practitioners and to buy resources for the centres.

Theme 4: Government appreciation of centre managers

Regarding the expectations of management/leadership in centres, managers as well as practitioners required the government to appreciate the effort taken to ensure children are kept in safe places and their comments were:

Parents pay centre fees, but not all of them. The salary they get is enough for rent and food, however, they appreciate our efforts for starting the centre and are greatly involved in the centre. They help clean and make teaching aids when they are off from work. The government, however, does not appreciate our efforts.

Centre managers' initiative of helping working mothers who could not take their children to formal centres that are expensive and far from home, is appreciated by practitioners. The parents who leave for work early and come home late, appreciate the centres near their homes because even when they are late from work, they find their children in a safe place. The managers indicated:

We are indeed good people. Parents are happy about us. We have to approach the government for centre support to enable practitioners to teach children in a way that will prepare them for the future.

Theme 5: Importance of formal education for centre success

The managers' expectation of support for practitioners and learners was for government sponsorship of each child to be increased as it was very little, compelling centre managers to ask for contributions from parents who earn little money. The practitioners' responses too valued children experiencing a formal education by qualified practitioners, taught about diversity and equity in a formal setting to enable practitioners to serve diverse learners in ECD classes. Training and preparation might clarify cultural perspectives, and provide opportunities for better understanding of children's cultures to align them to their background; they said:

We all need formal education. Children who do not experience a formal education, struggle in school and may lack self-confidence if they do not have knowledge that other children have. Poor teaching experiences can limit later cognitive development of learners. A formal education in a college or university might be of help in teaching multicultural classes.

Centre managers in a Black multicultural education context are having challenges in ensuring quality teaching and learning is provided to multilingual and multilingual classes because of lack of resources and support for practitioners. Managing culturally different learners entail bringing different cultural backgrounds together and converging these and the value systems to help the centre function as a whole (Hall, Barden & Conley, 2014). Therefore, managing multicultural centres should focus on preparing and training the centre staff to understand what is good for cultural groups having different philosophies of life. Knowledge gained from a formal education environment might improve performance and promote employment opportunities later in life. Managers should therefore ensure practitioners receive training and support in order to promote a better cross-cultural education in the centre.

Conclusion

It is important that centre managers meet the educational demands of a multicultural society rather than achieve social integration. In a pluralistic society like SA, with multicultural learners, the government should ensure that the minority cultures are not undermined by neglecting their culture and socio-economic situation. Notwithstanding the fact that handling a multicultural community is complex, leaders need to recognise the validity of differences, and show

commitment to managing a multicultural environment. The diverse learners with different cultures, languages and religions, should be provided with resources to develop its young ones. Therefore, leaders of centres need to apply a paradigm shift of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to ensure effective leadership occurs in a multicultural context.

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